Gorbachev New Soviet Leader: Youngest Chief in 60 Years; Reagan Won't ...
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Gorbachev New Soviet Leader

Youngest Chief in 60 Years; Reagan Won't Go to Funeral

54-Year-Old Succeeds Chernenko, Dead at 73

MOSCOW (AP)—Hours after the announcement of President Konstantin U. Chernenko's death at 73, his youngest lieutenant, Mikhail S. Gorbachev, took power today in a lightning shift away from the aged elite that has ruled the huge, secretive Soviet state for two decades.

The Kremlin announced that the long-ailing Chernenko, a "staunch fighter . . . for communism," died at 7:20 p.m. Sunday of emphysema and other problems.

Within five hours a second announcement came—the 54-year-old Gorbachev, youngest member of the ruling Politburo, had been chosen to succeed Chernenko in the most important Kremlin post, Communist Party general secretary. He is the youngest Soviet leader to take over that role in more than 60 years.

In Washington, President Reagan—who was awakened before dawn with word of Chernenko's death—said he will not attend the funeral.

Chernenko was the third Soviet party leader and president since

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1982, and his 13-month tenure was the shortest ever for a Kremlin chief.

But, although Gorbachev's accession to the seat of Lenin and Stalin marks a transition to a new generation of leadership, it is not expected to mean major alterations in either Soviet domestic or foreign policy.

Policies 'Unchanged'

In his acceptance speech, Gorbachev said the policies forged under Chernenko's predecessors, Leonid I. Brezhnev and Yuri V. Andropov, "remain unchanged."

Western diplomats here noted that Gorbachev, an agriculture and economic specialist who recently has taken on foreign missions as well, has been part of a collective Kremlin leadership whose views he most likely will continue to represent.

In addition, they said, it takes years before a Soviet leader can amass enough personal power to effect major changes.

But they noted one major difference—whereas Chernenko was, at 72, the oldest man to become party chief, Gorbachev is the youngest since Josef Stalin took power in 1924 at age 45. He could be launching a career that will take him to the end of the century, if he can master Kremlin power politics.

"Gorbachev has a lot of time to consolidate his position," one diplomat said.

It was not known whether Gorbachev will also be made president, as Chernenko and his two predecessors were. That designation is made by the Supreme Soviet, the national Parliament.

Sudden Recalls

The first sign of an emergency in Moscow came Sunday when traveling Soviet delegations were recalled suddenly from the United States and other countries. Early today, Soviet radio and television switched from their regular programming to somber music.

Finally, at 2 p.m. (3 a.m. PST), Tass press agency carried the death announcement, which was read simultaneously over broadcasting stations.

It said that Chernenko died "after a grave illness" and that the name of this "staunch fighter for the ideals of communism and for peace, will remain forever in the hearts of the Soviet people and of the whole of progressive mankind."

A later medical bulletin said he died of the lung disease emphysema, complicated by unspecified cardiac difficulties and chronic hepatitis that worsened into cirrhosis of his liver.

White House officials said Reagan was notified by his national security adviser, Robert C. McFarlane, within minutes after the Moscow announcement.

Noting that "there's an awful lot on my plate just now," Reagan said he decided against attending the funeral but was sending Vice President George Bush in his stead. If the Soviets stick to their customary practice of inviting nations to send small delegations to the funeral, Reagan will also name Secretary of State George P. Shultz and U.S. Ambassador Arthur A. Hartman to represent the United States, a White House official said.

Tass said Chernenko will be buried Wednesday in Red Square, where all but one of his predecessors—the ousted Nikita S. Khrushchev—are interred.

Here in Moscow, the city smoothly donned its mourning garb for the third time in just over two years.

Red-and-black draped flags on major buildings added a swathe of color to Gorky Street and other central thoroughfares. Police cordoned off the area around the House of Unions, where Chernenko will lie in state until the funeral.

The ruddy-faced, white-haired Chernenko, a Brezhnev protege and longtime party stalwart, reached the pinnacle of Kremlin power in February, 1984, when he was chosen Communist chief on the death of Andropov, the former KGB secret police chief who had taken over after Brezhnev died in November, 1982.

But by then Chernenko could be little more than an elderly figurehead, who dropped from public sight for months at a time because of his illnesses.

His stewardship was a time of rule by consensus. Foreign Minister Andrei A. Gromyko seemed to have the dominant voice on foreign policy, and Gorbachev had overall charge of economic planning.

'Wrangling Done Earlier'

After Tass announced that the 300-member party Central Committee had unanimously chosen Gorbachev as general secretary in an extraordinary plenary session, analysts here attributed the swiftness of the transition to lengthy preparation.

"I think there had been an understanding (about the succession)," one Western diplomat said. "Given Chernenko's condition—the obvious fact that he was going to die in the near future—I think the wrangling was done earlier."

In the last two transitions, the time of the succession announcement ranged from two to four days.

Gorbachev also was named head of Chernenko's funeral commission, traditionally a position held by a leader's successor.

In becoming general secretary, Gorbachev vaults over far more senior men, including Premier Nikolai A. Tikhonov, Gromyko and Moscow party chief Viktor V. Grishin.

Western experts said a sign of Gorbachev's influence will be his ability to quickly fill some of the vacant spots in the Politburo, which has had 14 or more members

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GORBACHEV

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in recent years but now has only 10.

Gorbachev is considered a staunch supporter of Andropov's reform-minded economic policies, more so than Chernenko was. Also unlike his predecessor, he has long experience in economic management, having overseen the Soviets' troubled agriculture sector for years.

Another major difference, diplomats noted, is a matter of style. Gorbachev attracted favorable headlines for his smooth, professional appearance during a recent trip to Britain.

"He looks good on the tube," a Western diplomat said. "He's credible. I've never heard a Gorbachev joke."

Chernenko was a Siberian peasant's son and a party activist for 55 years.

Born in Krasnoyarsk, 2,000 miles east of Moscow, he was a local Communist propagandist by age 18, and later worked as a border guard. He went to a party school in Moscow in 1943, and in the 1950s began his long association with Brezhnev, first serving him as propaganda chief in the southern republic of Moldavia.

After Brezhnev took over from Khrushchev in the mid-1960s, Chernenko was brought to Moscow to head the party's general department, a post in which for 18 years he had direct and constant contact with party officials across the Soviet Union.

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